

A Winter's Day in 1939

Author: Melinda Szymanik

Synopsis

In 1939, while Germany attacked from the West, the Soviet Red Army invaded eastern Poland. Once Poland is occupied by Russia, life changes dramatically for 12-year-old Adam and his family. They are ordered off their farm and transported to work in a labour camp in Russia. Conditions in the camp are harsh. It is freezing in winter and Adam's father, mother and older brother are forced to work to earn money to buy extra food to feed the family. The rations provided by the Russians are meagre and malnutrition and disease are rife in the camp. Life is hard for all of the Polish refugees and Adam is dismayed when his family is moved once again. This time they are placed on a farm which has been abandoned. Just when they have prepared the earth for planting, they are moved again. Adam's father and older brother Tomasz have agreed to fight alongside the Russians against Germany and with them gone Adam is in charge of his family. This is no easy task when food is scarce, conditions are harsh and death and disease lurk constantly in the shadows. Will Adam and his family make it through the war alive?

Text Type

A Winter's Day in 1939, written by New Zealand author Melinda Szymanik, is a fascinating account of life for Polish refugees during World War II. While the story is fictional many events that occur in the story are based on the experiences of Szymanik's own father, who was twelve when he and his family were transported out of Poland into a Russian labour camp. The story is told from the point of view of Adam, a twelve-year-old boy whose family are forced off their farm in Poland. Adam and his family are no strangers to tragedy; Adam has already lost a sister and his parents' a daughter. Now Adam's family consists of his parents, himself, his older brother Tomasz and his younger sister Zofia. They are a close family and determined to stay together. During their time at the labour camp they work hard to ensure that the family has enough to eat. Adam is forced to take incredible risks for his family by leaving the camp and trading with nearby villagers for food. The family are in an extremely harsh environment and are forced to fight just to survive.

The novel will appeal to all students who are interested in World War II history. Through Adam's eyes the reader learns that during wartime guns and tanks are not the only killers. The novel deals with the theme of survival and the idea that war often creates situations where people are treated inhumanely. Greed and a desire to expand a country's territory can lead to the displacement of thousands of innocent civilians who have no choice but to obey the orders of the invading country. While this is a story of incredible sadness and hardship, it is also a story of courage and hope.

Sharing the Novel

The novel is written in three parts and has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 13–25), Chapters 2–8 (pp. 26–91), Chapters 9–15 (pp. 95–185) and Chapters 16–24 (pp. 186–283).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. It would be a good idea to read the note from the author and study the map provided, as well as carrying out some library research so that students understand the context of the novel. Have students compare and contrast their own experiences with those of Adam and his family. Encourage them to track how the character of Adam changes throughout the course of the story and what his experiences teach him. Students should be able to identify important themes and explain how they are developed by the author.

Introducing the Novel

Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- What is significant about the year 1939?
- Who is the main character in the novel?
- Why do you think the main character and his family are forced to leave their country? Where are they taken?
- What conditions do they have to endure in their new home? Why can't they escape?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 13–25) aloud. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 13–25)

- When does the story begin?
- Why do you think there are people with suitcases passing through the village?
- Why doesn't Adam want to tell his mother that his father plans to race Zorka?
- Why does Adam's mum ask him to be quiet?
- What do Adam's family grow on their farm?
- Why doesn't Adam like collecting firewood in the forest?
- Why is Adam so proud of his father?
- Why do the local Ukraine boys resent Adam being in the new part of Poland?
- Why doesn't Adam want anyone to know that he whacked the bee hive?
- Why does Adam have to run into town and find his father?
- Where does Adam's father take Maria?

Discussion

- What do we find out about Adam and his family in this chapter?
- What evidence is there in this chapter to suggest that Adam and his family don't have a lot of money?
- What is the war talk about and how does this make Adam feel?

Students read Chapters 2–8 (pp. 26–91) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2–8 (pp. 26–91)

- When did Germany invade Poland and what did the Polish forces do?
- How long has it been since Maria died? How has her death affected the family?
- Why is Tomasz studying? Why is Adam jealous of him?
- What happens to interrupt the family's dinner?
- What chore does Adam's father give him before he leaves to volunteer for war? How does Adam feel about his father leaving him? Why does he return home?
- What do Tomasz and Adam do when they see the soldiers?
- What does Adam rescue from the log?
- How does Adam's father react when Tomasz tells him that they saw Russian soldiers?
- Why doesn't Adam tell his father about the rabbit initially? How does his father respond when Adam summons up the courage to ask him if he can keep it? Why does he react like this?
- Why are the Russian soldiers in Poland?
- What does Adam do with the rabbit?
- What does Adam think the T-27s look like?
- What are the Russian soldiers doing to all of the important people in town? Why do you think they are doing this?
- Why does Adam's mum try and stop his father from going into town?
- How does Adam feel when the tanks stop in front of his house? What does he do? Where do the soldiers set up camp? What does Adam discover when he goes to check the glasshouse?

- Why does Adam's father agree to let the Polish soldier stay in their home? What will the consequences be if he is caught?
- Why are Adam's family so surprised when they hear a car drive up? Why do the men arrest Adam's father? What does Adam think is going to happen to his father?
- Describe Adam's visit to his father in jail. What reason have the Russians given Adam's father for his arrest?
- How long do the Russians keep Adam's father in jail?
- Who are Pan Tober and Hanna? Why do they stay with Adam's family?
- Why is Wroclaw not a good place for Jews to be?
- Why does Adam's family have to leave the farm? Who is taking over the farm? Where do Adam's family go?
- How do Adam and his family feel about leaving the farm? Is the Russians' decision to evict the family from the farm fair? Why/why not?
- How does Adam feel about his new home? How does Adam's mum react when she sees her chest of drawers? Why do you think she reacts like this?
- Why do the Russian authorities take the farm off Yure? Who do they give it to instead? Why is Adam's father unhappy about this decision?
- Why don't Adam and his family have meat to eat on Christmas Day?
- Who comes to collect Adam and his family in the middle of the night? Where do you think they will be taken?

Discussion

- How do you think Adam and his family felt while they were waiting for the German forces to reach their village?
- What does the fact that Adam's father agrees to hide Polish soldiers suggest about his character? Why is Adam angry at his father about this? Do you agree with Adam that "he always did what he wanted without thought for the rest of us"?
- Why do you think the Russian soldiers arrest all of the people in the village who are considered important? How else do they "tear at the heart of the community"?
- How does Adam's life change after the Russians invade Poland?
- How does the war and the sacrifices that people have to make bring out the best in some people? How does Adam's family help others? Who helps them?
- What do you think will happen in the story next?

Students read Chapters 9–15 (pp. 95–185) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 9–15 (pp. 95–185)

- How long do Adam and his family have to wait for the train? Where are they being taken? How does Adam feel when the train finally arrives?
- Describe conditions aboard the train. What do you think the worst part of travelling on the train would be? What happens when the temperature drops?
- What happens to the woman who refuses to go to the toilet in the pipe?
- Where does the train finally stop? Describe Adam's new 'home'.
- Jobs are allocated to people over what age? What jobs are Bogdan and Tomasz given? Where is Adam's mother assigned to? What does Adam mean when he says that everyone is 'equal'?
- Why is the children's freedom 'phony'?
- What happens when Adam leaves the boundary of the camp?
- Who is Lydia? How does she help Zofia?
- Why does Adam's father get angry at him when he helps him at work? Is his anger justified? Why/why not?
- What are some of the hazards of Adam's father's job?
- What are Adam and his family given to eat each day?
- What is Adam's job for his family? Why is his job important?
- How does Adam secure meat for his family?
- What is the punishment for anyone caught leaving the camp?
- What does Adam's mum give him to trade? How does Adam feel as he makes his way towards the collectives?
- How is Adam treated by the woman when he arrives at the first house? What happens when the woman's son comes home? How does Adam feel when he returns home empty-handed?
- What happens to the men who are caught outside the camp without permission? Why does Adam stop going to the collectives?
- Who is Pani Wisniewska? Why do the guards want to stop her from educating the Polish children with her own material? What do they want her to teach instead?
- Why isn't spring all 'warmth' and 'sunshine'?

- What are some of the diseases that are rife in the Semonovo camp? Why are the prisoners so susceptible to them?
- Why is Adam so worried when Lydia and her sisters don't turn up for class?
- Why doesn't Lydia return to school?
- Why does Adam have mixed feelings about leaving the camp?
- How does Adam know that the train is heading north? Why is he afraid to hop off the train when it stops?
- Why has Adam's mother been feeling sick?
- Describe Adam's new camp.
- Who is Henryk? Why is he in the camp?
- Who does Zofia find in the camp? Why is Adam so pleased to see him and his family?
- How does Adam feel when his mother gets taken away on the sleigh?
- What is the name of Adam's new baby sister? Why did her mother stay in hospital with her for as long as possible?
- What problems does the freezing weather cause for the prisoners? What happens to Pan Tober?
- What is 'night blindness'? What causes it?
- What happens to Zuzanna? Who says a prayer for her?
- Why does Adam spend more and more time at the stables after his sister's death?
- What happens to Viktor after he dies?
- Why is Adam weary of going with Henryk to the swamps? Why does Adam wish that his father was more like Henryk?
- What kind of work is Tomasz doing at the swamp?
- What does Adam take back to his mother from the swamp?
- What new job is Adam given in summer?
- Describe Adam's encounter with the bear.
- Why does Adam feel like crying when Zofia tells him about the school?
- Why were the Polish citizens imprisoned in Soviet labour camps released in June, 1941?
- How does Adam's mum feel when her husband and son sign up to fight for the Soviet Union?

- Why does Adam think that “freedom wasn’t any different from being a prisoner of Mother Russia”?
- Where do Adam’s family decide to go?
- What happens to the people who haven’t signed up for the army?
- Describe what happens when Adam and his family arrive at the port.

Discussion

- Why doesn’t Adam enjoy having lots of time with nothing to do? What does Adam miss about his old life?
- Why does Adam suggest that he go into the village to trade for extra food? What does this suggest about his character?
- How do the Soviet soldiers ensure that the people in the work camp are compliant?
- Why is controlling how children are educated so important if you are trying to introduce a new regime?
- What do you think it would be like not having a home and being moved around from place to place? Adam’s future is uncertain. How do you think this would make him feel?
- What do you think is going to happen next?

Students read Chapters 16–24 (pp. 186–283) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension 16–24 (pp. 186–283)

- What does Adam see from the boat that startles him?
- Why is the boat floating over treetops and church steeples?
- Why is Adam’s father angry that he didn’t tell him about the German soldiers?
- What ‘signs of war’ does Adam notice when he arrives in Rybinsk?
- Where does the boat finally drop them off? Why doesn’t Adam’s family leave the building?
- Why does Adam’s father decide to take the train to Buzuluk?
- Why can’t the family just go back to Poland?
- Who is General Anders? Where are Tomasz and Adam’s father going to be trained? What is going to happen to the rest of the family?
- How does Adam’s mum react to being separated from the rest of her family?

- What job does Adam's father give him as he leaves the train?
- Why is the future of the Polish soldiers so uncertain?
- Why does Adam nearly miss the train?
- Why aren't the passengers on the train pleased to learn they are travelling to Nukus?
- Who are Kluskowa and Irena?
- How does Adam feel when he is separated from his mother and sister? How does Irena convince him not to walk back and look for them?
- Where do Adam and Irena decide to wait for their mothers?
- Describe Adam's new home.
- What motivates Adam and Kluskowa to steal the grain? Is stealing ever justified? Why/why not?
- Why does Adam's father return from Tockoye?
- How do Adam and his father prepare the earth for planting?
- What lesson does Adam learn from Tomasz the raven?
- Why does Adam hate burning the fields so much? Why is it important that Adam and his father get the hand plough before his father leaves? Why don't they get a chance to plough the field?
- Why is Adam so frustrated to be returned to Cardzou? Where are they taken from there?
- What is Adam's impression of the Kirov farm collective? Describe their sleeping arrangements. Who are they working for?
- Why does Adam think that the Soviets "have a strange idea of freedom"?
- Why does Irena want to join the army? Why doesn't Adam's dad want him to join?
- Why does food become a huge problem for Adam's family after a few months on the new farm? What is Adam forced to do to their goat?
- Why is General Anders 'fed up' with the Soviets? Where do the British want the Polish soldiers to go?
- How does Kluskowa convince Adam to go to Bukhara with her?
- What are Kluskowa and Adam given when they reach the front of the line? What bad news does Kluskowa receive?
- How did Irena die? Why is her death ironic?

- Why does Adam take one of the cottonseed cakes? What are the consequences of eating them?
- Why are Adam and his mother and sister being evacuated to Persia?
- Why is Adam's father denied permission to escort his family to the evacuation centre?
- Why does Kluskowa decide to go to Bukhara?
- What news is Adam's mother given when they arrive at the evacuation centre? What effects do they suffer from the lack of food?
- What illness does Adam succumb to? Why does the doctor want to keep him in hospital as long as possible? Why does Adam want to return to his mother and sister?
- How long does Adam have to stay in hospital for?
- Why does the evacuation centre become known as 'the orphanage'?
- What job is Adam given?
- Why are the authorities forced to provide the refugees with food?
- What illness does Adam's mother contract? How does Adam feel about having to leave her behind?
- What food is provided for Adam and Zofia on the train?
- What news are Adam and Zofia given about their mother? How do they react to the news? Why does Adam feel guilty?
- Why can't Adam be happy in his new home in Tehran?
- Why does Adam refuse to travel to Kenya?
- Describe Adam's reunion with his father and brother. How does Adam's father make him feel better about what has happened?
- What does Adam's father give him as a Christmas present?

Discussion

- Why is Adam so determined to stay with his mother and Zofia? What happens to the people who are left behind by the train? How do you think it would feel to be left behind and separated from your family?
- How do you think it would feel having absolutely no control over your own life? Where you live, how you earn a living and your very survival depends on others. What would be the worst part of not being able to make your own choices?
- Why does Adam feel like he has fewer options for the future since the war started?
- What information do we find out about the family in the postscript?

Activities

Research – Choose an interesting aspect of World War II to conduct a research assignment on. You may want to research Hitler, the concentration camps or the labour camps. Formulate focussing questions, come up with possible sources of information and record the research process. Present your information as a poster, in an essay or in a speech.

Plot – Choose 10 important events that occur in the story. Draw a flow diagram that lists the events in the order that they occur.

Character – Draw a picture of Adam on a large piece of paper. On one side of the paper list all of his positive characteristics and qualities. On the other side list his negative characteristics. Include quotes and evidence from the story to back up your ideas.

Theme – Many important themes and ideas are raised in this novel. Choose one theme and design a collage that depicts this theme. Include a quote from the story to help reveal your theme.

Letter – Write a letter to a friend explaining why this is an important novel to read.

Review – Write a book review suitable for publication in a school newspaper. Include a brief summary of *A Winter's Day in 1939*. Explain the importance of the setting in the story and describe the main characters. Include information about the main themes and ideas presented in the story and give your personal opinion about the book.

Character – Write a paragraph about how Adam's character develops and changes throughout the course of the book.

Family Relationships – Describe Adam's relationship with each family member. Whom is he closest to and why? Whom does he have conflict with and why does this conflict occur? Find evidence from the text to support your ideas.

Poster – Design a poster advertising the novel for your school library. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas. Include illustrations and images from the text to make your poster appealing and encourage others to read the book.